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ABSTRACT

The relative importance of adolescents' levels of perceived social support and their satisfaction with their supportive relationships in terms of predicting personal agency beliefs (an individual's capability and context beliefs) was studied with data collected from 174 upper-middle class high school students (75 males and 99 females) in the San Francisco Bay Area (California), aged from 16 to 18 years. Participants' social support level and degree of satisfaction were assessed using the Youth Social Support Questionnaire. Personal agency beliefs were measured using the Assessment of Personal Agency Beliefs, measuring the capability and context beliefs that individuals hold in relation to common life goals. A one-way analysis of variance was performed using the following four social support groups as independent variables: (1) high satisfaction/high level; (2) high satisfaction/low level; (3) low satisfaction/high level; and (4) low satisfaction/low level. Five selected goals, most related to emotional health and competence in interpersonal relationships, were dependent variables. Results reveal significant group differences for both capability and context beliefs for all five goals, suggesting that when students are satisfied with their social support, the level (the number of relationships) seems to make little difference. Several theories regarding why level of perceived support is not equally satisfying are examined, and possible directions for future research are suggested. There is one table of study data, and a 21-item list of references. (SLD)

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Social Support Level and Satisfaction as
Predictors of Personal Agency Beliefs in Adolescence

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to compare the relative importance of adolescents' level of perceived social support and their satisfaction with their supportive relationships in terms of predicting personal agency beliefs (i.e., an individual's capability and context beliefs). Data were collected from 174 upper-middle class high school students, ranging in age from 16-18 years old. Participants' social support level and degree of satisfaction were assessed using the Youth Social Support Questionnaire. Personal agency beliefs were measured using the Assessment of Personal Agency Beliefs, an instrument designed to measure the capability and context beliefs that individuals hold in relation to common life goals. A one-way ANOVA was performed using four social support groups (i.e., High Satisfaction/High Level, High Satisfaction/Low Level, Low Satisfaction/High Level, and Low Satisfaction/Low Level) as independent variables and personal agency beliefs regarding five selected goals, most related to emotional health and competence in interpersonal relationships, as dependent variables. The results revealed significant group differences for both capability and context beliefs for all five goals, suggesting that when students are satisfied with their social support, level (i.e., number of relationships) seems to make little difference. A number of theories regarding why level of perceived social support is not equally satisfying are examined, and possible directions for future research on adolescent satisfaction with social support are suggested.

Social Support Level and Satisfaction as
Predictors of Personal Agency Beliefs in Adolescence

The objective of this study was to compare the relative importance of adolescents' level of perceived social support and their satisfaction with their supportive relationships in terms of predicting a set of outcomes associated with emotional health and behavioral competence, namely personal agency beliefs. There exists a large body of research examining the role of perceived social support in maintaining people's health and well-being (see Cohen & Willis, 1985). Recent research has demonstrated that increases in perceived social support in childhood and early adolescence are predictive of improvements in social and academic competence over a two-year period, and may even play an important causal role in facilitating adolescent adjustment (Dubow, Tisak, Causey, Hryshko, & Reid, 1991).

How might social support produce these effects? One line of thinking suggests that a primary psychological mechanism by which social support has its positive effects on adjustment is through personal agency beliefs (Cauce & Srebnik, 1989; Love & Ford, 1990). Personal agency beliefs have been referred to using many labels -- e.g., self-efficacy, learned helplessness, locus of control, perceived competence -- but essentially they are composed of two interrelated but conceptually distinct processes: capability beliefs (i.e., expectations about one's ability to successfully attain desired goals) and context beliefs (i.e., expectations regarding the responsiveness of the environment to one's goal attainment effort). Thoits (1985) provides an explanation for this main effects model of social support and its relationship to personal agency beliefs. She proposes that

emotional support is obtained through ongoing role relationships that are psychologically beneficial in three ways. First these relationships provide a set of social identities, giving people a sense of belonging and purpose in their lives. Second, the approval of others and the perception of being loved and valued can bolster self-esteem and positive self-evaluations. Lastly, when individuals are successful meeting role expectations, this can increase their sense of personal control or efficacy.

Two hypotheses have been proposed with regard to the aspect of social support that best facilitates adjustment (Berndt, 1989). The first hypothesis is that those individuals with the greatest number of supportive relationships will show the best outcomes. The second hypothesis states that it is not the number of supportive relationships per se, but an individual's feeling of satisfaction with their social relationships that best predicts positive adjustment. As best we can tell, these two hypotheses have not been explicitly compared in the child and adolescent development literature. In one indirectly relevant study, Barrera (1981) found with a group of 86 pregnant adolescents, satisfaction and the need for support were stronger predictors of depressive symptoms than was network size. Satisfaction has been shown to be more likely to be associated with indices of physical and psychological well-being than frequency of actual supportive behaviors or the number confidants within one's social network in adult samples also (Hobfall, Nadler, & Leiberan, 1986; Krause, 1987). Whether this result would hold for a more psychological measure of one's perceived level of social support -- or for other populations of children or adolescents is unknown.

The present study examined, in a relatively high-achieving sample of

adolescents, the question of whether the number of supportive relationships in a young person's life, or the satisfaction these relationships provide is a better predictor of an individuals' personal agency beliefs.

Method

Data were collected from 174 students (99 girls and 75 boys) attending a public high school in an upper-middle class community of the San Francisco Bay Area. Students ranging in age from 16-18 years old completed questionnaire packets in their classes on two consecutive days.

Participants' perceived social support level and degree of satisfaction were assessed using the Youth Social Support Questionnaire, a one-page questionnaire designed to measure both the size of the student's social support network and the degree to which the student feels satisfied with their level of perceived social support. In previous research the Youth Social Support Questionnaire has yielded positive correlations (ranging from .28 to .50) with a diversity of social competence criterion variables (Ford, 1982). This measure begins with an item asking students to choose one of a pair of opposing statements: "There is at least one person I feel really close to right now, whom I can go to when I need help or when I just need to feel good about myself" and "I don't have anyone I feel really close to right now." Students who chose the second statement were given a score of 0. Those who chose the first statement were asked to list the first name or initials of each person to whom they felt close, and to assign numbers from a 3-point scale indicating how helpful these people would be if the student were to go to them for "support, encouragement, and advise" (i.e., somewhat, fairly, or extremely helpful). Students were also asked to rate on a 5-point scale (ranging from "not very" to "extremely" satisfied) the degree to which they were satisfied with the size and supportiveness of their social support network.

Scores from the students' YSSQ were used to create four extreme groups: High Satisfaction/High Level, High Satisfaction/Low Level, Low Satisfaction/High Level, and Low Satisfaction/Low Level. See Table 1 for further information on scoring and group size.

Students were also asked to complete the Assessment of Personal Agency Beliefs (APAB) (Ford & Chase, 1991), a paper-and-pencil instrument designed to measure the capability and context beliefs that individuals hold in relation to 21 common life goals. For the purpose of the present study we selected 5 of these goals which most directly represented outcomes associated with emotional health and competence in interpersonal relationships (i.e., "Having close personal relationships", "Feeling accepted and supported by your peers", "Feeling good about yourself", "Maintaining a positive outlook on life", and "Feeling happy")

Students completing the APAB were first asked to indicate on a 7-point scale (ranging from "Never" to "Always Important") for each goal, "How often is this an important goal for you in your everyday life?" Students then went on to respond to two additional questions representing their capability and context beliefs for goal attainment in each of the five selected domains. The first question assessing capability beliefs asked, "Considering only YOURSELF -- your skills, interests, and personality -- do you think you are capable of being successful in this area?" Responses were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from "Never Capable" to "Always Capable". The second question, which assessed context beliefs, asked, "Considering only things OUTSIDE of yourself -- your family and friends, your school or job situation, etc. -- do you think they generally make it easier or harder for you to succeed in this area?" Responses were again rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from "Always Harder" to "Always Easier".

Results and Discussion

A one-way ANOVA was performed using the four social support groups (i.e., High Satisfaction/High Level, High Satisfaction/Low Level, Low Satisfaction/High Level, and Low Satisfaction/Low Level) as independent variables and personal agency beliefs regarding the five selected goals as dependent variables. Results of this ANOVA revealed significant group differences for both capability and context beliefs for all five goals (see Table 1). Duncan's Multiple Range tests indicated that satisfaction was the factor largely responsible for this difference. Group means for High Satisfaction/High Level averaged a little higher than for the High Satisfaction/Low Level group, but there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups. Although the Low Satisfaction/High Level group tended to score higher with regard to social relationship goals (i.e., "Having Close Personal Relationships" and "Feeling Accepted and Supported By Your Peers"), the Low Satisfaction/High Level group was no better than the Low Satisfaction/Low Level groups with regard to the three goals representing psychological well-being.

These results suggest that when students are satisfied with their social support, level (i.e., number of relationships) seems to make little difference. For those low on satisfaction, a high level of perceived support seems to provide only minimal help and only in the social relationship domain.

There are a number of explanations for why greater levels of perceived social support may not necessarily enhance psychological functioning. Henderson, Bryne, and Duncan-Jones (1981) suggest that people with a high affiliation drive or need for affiliation may require more social support in order to feel satisfaction. However, the data from our study do not

support this theory. Students in the Low Satisfaction/High Level group do not have stronger affiliative goals than those of any other group.

We would suggest that some of the alternative explanations for low satisfaction may be more viable. For instance, more supportive relationships may not mean more support. Personal relationships involve both positive and negative qualities. For example, Hartup (1989) reports that children's friendships involve a considerable amount of conflict. Selman (1980) interviewed children about their understanding of conflicts and the role that these conflicts played in their ongoing relationships with friends. He found that older children and adolescents understand that conflict is inherent in close relationships and, when it can be resolved, may in fact strengthen the relationship.

Even the best relationships have costs as well as benefits. Stokes (1983) found a curvilinear relationship between social support network size and satisfaction. Satisfaction with social support increased with network size up to a point, but bigger did not mean better. Moderately sized networks were positively related to satisfaction, whereas either small or large networks were associated with dissatisfaction. Stokes hypothesizes that it takes work to build and maintain satisfying support networks and that such networks entail mutual obligation. Lee (1985) calls this principle the "norm of reciprocity." When support is given to an individual, it means that, in the future, that individual may be expected to be a support provider. Supporting an extremely large social support network may be too costly in time and energy for an individual to maintain, especially considering that the network probably will not provide that person with significantly more support than would a network of moderate size. Moreover, intimacy, which has been found to be an important feature

in social support satisfaction (Hobfoll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986), may become diluted in large support networks. Thus, measures of social support satisfaction may be more accurate measures of the balance between relationship benefits and relationship demands and obligations than network size or perceived level of social support.

A third explanation for why higher levels of perceived support may not guarantee greater satisfaction is that receipt of aid may be influenced by the recipient's subjective appraisal of its meaning. Some people may infer that needing help implies a lower level of personal competence (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitchner-Alagna, 1982). For example, people with a generally negative sense of personal agency may be particularly vulnerable to incoming negative information about their competence and self-reliance (Hobfoll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986). Conversely, people with high self-esteem often have negative reactions to aid -- perhaps devaluing the aid received because it is incompatible with their self-perceptions of competence (Barrera & Baca, 1990). In short, being on the receiving end of support can engender feelings of dependency which may negatively affect the recipient's capability beliefs.

The present data do not allow us to decide between these last two explanations for the satisfaction that some people derive from their social support. But the fact that people with low levels of social support satisfaction score relatively low on both capability and context beliefs implies that the truth may lie in a combination of environmental and personal factors.

This study lends further credence to the use of satisfaction measures in studying the effects of adolescent social support. Satisfaction may be a more powerful predictor than the social support measures more frequently used, which generally focus on level or amount of support. Future research

should investigate satisfaction with social support's causal role on various indices of adolescent adjustment. Although satisfaction with social support seems to be critical to the prediction of well-being, it has been open to criticism that it is merely a reflection of adjustment status (Barrera, 1981). Recent research with elderly adults has examined this issue and provides evidence of a causal relationship between satisfaction with social support and well-being. Krause, Liang, and Yatomi (1989) have found that changes in satisfaction with support tend to precede changes in depressive symptoms. The issue of support satisfaction's causal role has not been examined with children and or adolescents to our knowledge.

The present study also points out the importance of learning more about what leads an adolescent to feel satisfaction in their social relations. A number of network features (e.g., mode of support, density or complexity of the network, and the type of relationships) have been studied in adult populations to assess their connection to social support satisfaction (Vaux & Harrison, 1985). The role of these network features may be especially interesting to examine in adolescent populations. For example, the density of an adult's social support network (the number of people in an individual's network who have their own relationships with other network members) has been found to be related to satisfaction with support only in certain circumstances. High-density networks seem to be most beneficial in situations wherein one wants to maintain the status quo, possibly because participants in these complex, closely-knit networks feel threatened when others in their network want to change. Low-density networks seem to be more satisfying in situations that require change and trying out new roles. Traditionally adolescence has been considered a time when young people are faced with many changes, and need to try out new

roles (Erikson, 1950). Consequently, one might wonder whether adolescents are more satisfied with low-density networks or if adolescents' social support networks are more tolerant of change than are adult networks. With this type of knowledge about the role that network features play in satisfaction with support, we can more accurately intervene to improve satisfaction with social support and consequently facilitate personal agency beliefs and optimal adjustment.

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Table 1: Personal Agency Beliefs for Social Relationship and Psychological Well-Being Goals for Adolescents Varying in Social Support Satisfaction and Level of Social Support

(NOTE: Social Support Satisfaction was rated on a five-point scale; HI = 5, LO = 1-3. Level of Social Support represents the number of people one could go to for help or support; HI = 7 or more, LO = 5 or fewer. Capability Beliefs were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from "Never" to "Always Capable"; Context Beliefs were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from "Always Harder" [i.e., the person's context always makes it harder for them to attain the goal] to "Always Easier")

GOAL	SOCIAL SUPPORT GROUP				F
	Hi Satis. Hi Level (N = 43)	Hi Satis. Lo Level (N = 16)	Lo Satis. Hi Level (N = 10)	Lo Satis. Lo Level (N = 22)	
Having Close Personal Relationships					
Capability Beliefs	a 6.5	a 6.6	b 5.5	b 5.1	** 9.52
Context Beliefs	a 6.4	a 6.4	b 4.8	b 4.3	** 29.22
Feeling Accepted and Supported By Your Peers					
Capability Beliefs	a 6.0	ab 5.6	a 5.6	b 4.9	** 7.13
Context Beliefs	a 5.5	ab 5.0	b 4.7	b 4.5	* 3.85
Feeling Good About Yourself					
Capability Beliefs	a 5.7	ab 5.3	ab 4.9	b 4.5	* 3.15
Context Beliefs	a 5.7	ab 4.6	b 4.3	b 4.1	** 5.82
Maintaining a Positive Outlook on Life					
Capability Beliefs	a 5.8	ab 5.7	c 4.4	bc 4.9	** 5.67
Context Beliefs	a 5.4	ab 5.6	bc 4.4	c 4.2	** 4.90
Feeling Happy					
Capability Beliefs	a 6.0	a 6.2	b 4.6	b 4.6	** 8.03
Context Beliefs	a 5.5	ab 5.1	b 4.3	b 4.0	** 5.97

NOTE: Means with different superscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$ (Duncan's Multiple Range Test).

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$